

After a Tumultuous 2020, Wishing for a Better 2021



It has been a tumultuous 2020 in Easton as in every other town in America, due to COVID-19. The town got through the first wave in the spring with very low numbers of infections, although like most towns, we were forced to suspend in-person learning in our schools, for the spring semester.

Initially, the number of unemployed residents in Easton spiked from 49 to 412, but then declined fairly rapidly. The summer and early fall were relatively quiet, and we were able to begin school in a hybrid form and then progress to full in-school learning.

With the second wave in the fall, numbers of infections began to grow steadily, and after multiple partial closures due to contact tracing, and required quarantines, our schools went to full distance learning, hopefully to resume in-school programs in January.

Through the pandemic our Senior Center and municipal agent have worked tirelessly to provide services for our seniors to keep them healthy and engaged, whether remotely in the first wave or now with limited in-person services. Our library and Park and Recreation Department have held what programs they could. Although limited, we were able to celebrate our 175th anniversary as a town, with the highlight being a spectacular but safe fireworks display sponsored by our EMS.

Related to this, our sanitarian and health director informed us that after many years of dedicated service they both wished to resign, so our part-time Easton Health Department would become nonfunctional. There was an understanding that for some time we had been providing inadequate services to the town, particularly in the public health arena.

We began to make preparations to join the Westport/Weston Health District which could provide us with a much higher level of service. This required a town meeting and vote for us to join, and with the surge in the virus this became impossible. As a result, we entered into a contractual agreement with the District to manage Easton's health services for one year.

During the pandemic their services have been invaluable in providing not only advice from a qualified public health director, but for testing services, contact tracing, and eventually help with vaccinations, none of which Easton could have managed on its own. As soon as we can hold town meetings the question of whether to join permanently will be put to the town.

By executive order of the governor, and for the first time in memory, the budget process was completed without a town meeting. The resulting budget had an overall increase of 1.79%, and a decrease of the mill rate from 31.33 to 31.00. Again, we hope to return to a normal process in 2021.

Accomplishments

Some things were accomplished in town despite the pandemic. I have made it a priority to maintain Easton's strong farming heritage, and two of our important farms in town were able to be purchased so as to preserve their farm status in perpetuity. I have worked closely with the agricultural commission to preserve these farms and to promote farming in general in our town.

When I took office, the South Park Avenue bridge was months behind schedule. The bridge opened in June, making many of our lives substantially easier and obviating the need for people to detour through our quiet streets. In 2021 work will begin on the single-lane bridge on South Park Avenue with plans to complete it before the end of the year.

At the beginning of my term we established a South Park Avenue Advisory Committee to look at options for the South Park property which had been a source of debate since the town purchased it in 2008. Part of that property has environmental significance, particularly to the Mill River and its trout population.

With the backing of the committee, we are prepared to sell more than half the property to the Aspetuck Land Trust with the help of a state grant. This would preserve the land in its natural state forever and provide for badly needed upkeep which the town was unable to provide since its purchase. The committee is still considering possible uses for the remaining upland parcel.

Housing Market

The pandemic has had a profound effect on housing in Easton. The influx of new buyers has been remarkable. By every measure, the housing market in Easton is booming with over 100 homes sold since March and with values increasing as well. This is good news for all of us and showcases the unique character of Easton and its attractiveness to others.

Several of the sales were of properties which were significantly in arrears with their taxes and thus provided large tax windfalls to the town. There has also been a large increase in new construction, additions and home improvements. One of my priorities has been to make Easton a “builder-friendly town.” We have upgraded many of the processes for permitting and approvals in Town Hall, even as we have been closed to the public. This work is ongoing.

Connectivity and Town Services

August brought the tropical storm Isaias which knocked out power to much of our town for five to seven days. I became heavily involved in the town's response in the aftermath. There were many downed trees in town, affecting both our roads and our power lines. We worked with UI and our own DPW to clear the roads and restore service but learned that many of the trees that fell were supposed to have been trimmed or removed years ago.

After I had the town file to join in an action by the Public Utility Regulatory Agency against UI, numerous tree crews worked on behalf of UI doing the tree work which will hopefully make us more resilient to further storms.

The town is also looking into improving Internet service, which performed poorly throughout the storm and clean up and has been a chronic issue for years. With our DPW and emergency services, we reviewed all procedures so that we would be able to provide better service to our residents in the aftermath of future storms.

The town negotiated a new firefighters' contract, without having to go to the arbitration for the first time in three cycles, as well as a new lease for the firehouse. In the wake of the death of George Floyd we established the Diversity and Inclusion Task force.

We temporarily halted the proliferation of 5G while its health effects are further studied. The American flag now flies in front of Town Hall 24/7 for the first time. The Department of Public Works and EMS communications have been improved, making our town safer.

We are looking to hire a consultant to help us improve and better coordinate our emergency services, and considering changes to the roles of Park and Recreation maintenance and the Department of Public Works in maintaining town property to achieve efficiencies.

Looking ahead, Easton is on good financial footing. As mentioned, there was a substantial windfall from the collection of back taxes. The sale of part of the South Park Avenue parcel to the land trust will begin to reduce our debt. Tax collection came in at normal levels despite the economic effects of the pandemic. In 2021 we will begin a revaluation of property in Easton. As a result, I hope there will be an increase in the grand list, which will also be a positive for the town's finances.

Finally, many services were curtailed or unnecessary due to the pandemic, and so many departments will return unused funds to the town. We have worked to recoup much of our Covid response costs from the state. We do have further labor negotiations ahead, potential costs associated with new laws regarding police department policies and an increasing financial obligation for Region 9 as the proportion of students from Easton at Joel Barlow High School continues to grow.

Quality of Life

My vision moving forward is a focus on the quality of life and services provided here in Easton. We are consistently challenged in Easton by our lack of revenue, relying solely on the taxes paid by our residents. I continue to look at grants and partnerships to bring funds into town so that we can accomplish things that improve our overall quality of life.

I have made it clear that I think the town should, under the right circumstances, appropriate funds to seed projects for which we can then obtain large grants. This could fund enhancements such as a pathway along part of Sport Hill Road, which both our police and school administrators say is needed for safety, as well as safety improvements at the corner of Route 136 and Center Road. Easton Little League renovated the 50/70 field behind 660 Morehouse Road, and we are looking for a home for a pickleball court for our seniors.

As everyone knows, the largest part of our budget is for educating our students. I do not

think we can imagine the harm caused to our young people by the Covid-related disruptions in their education. Addressing the students' needs will be a focus for our Board of Education and will require a financial commitment from our town.

Transparency

As I hope is now apparent, I have worked to keep your government transparent and to keep you informed about what is going on in town, as well as what my thoughts are on key issues. However you are reading this, you can do your part to stay informed by signing up for the town website and alerts, keeping up with various social media sites dedicated to Easton and reading the Easton Courier.

We have a very talented citizenry and many avenues for our people to participate in town activities and functions. Again, open positions on boards and commissions are listed on the website, or contact me at town hall.

There are many new residents in town, and I hope this message is reaching them. First, Welcome! And for those of us who have been around we can help get the message to our new families that they are welcome in Easton and that we urge them to learn about, and become active in town.

It is your town, which I am privileged to serve, and Easton's citizens, through the town meeting, are its true government. We all wish for a better 2021. Be, happy, healthy and safe!